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PRESS RELEASE

BANGLADESHI AMERICAN IS FIRST MUSLIM CHAPLAIN IN MARINE CORPS

Abuhena Saifulislam Counsels Troops from All Backgrounds and Faiths

**By Phillip Kurata
Staff Writer**

WASHINGTON, FEBRUARY 13 -- A man who once was a student in the United States from Bangladesh has become the first Muslim chaplain in the U.S. Marine Corps, using his love for God and humanity to help U.S. military personnel of all faiths and backgrounds.

Abuhena Saifulislam, 45, joined the U.S. Navy in September 1992 after receiving a master's degree in business administration from the University of New Hampshire. He had come to the United States from Bangladesh as a student in 1989 and received residency rights through the U.S. government immigration lottery.

Working in the Navy in payroll and accounting, he became a U.S. citizen at the end of 1995 and then embarked on his quest to become a Muslim military chaplain.

"When I found out that they were looking for Muslim chaplains, I wanted to become one. I was already involved in religious activities inside the Pentagon [Defense Department headquarters], establishing Friday services and other such things," the chaplain said.

In 1996, the Defense Department and the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences in Leesburg, Virginia, set up a program to train Muslim military chaplains, and Saifulislam enrolled as the first student in the program. He completed the rigorous coursework in two years, was inducted into the chaplain candidate program in 1998, and, the following year, received his chaplain's commission. The Navy assigned him to the Marines, a subdivision of the Navy, as the corps' first Muslim chaplain. He represents the United States as Muslim military chaplain abroad and at home, helping U.S. service people understand Islam and counseling individual soldiers, most of whom are not Muslim. (See "First Muslim Chaplain to Join U.S. Marine Corps (<http://www.america.gov/st/washfile-english/2007/June/20070629130918xjsnommis0.1244013.html>).")

"Ninety-nine percent of the people who come to me for counseling are not Muslim," he said. "We, as chaplains, support everybody. When it comes to personal relationships, marriage, drugs, alcohol, stress or financial problems, religion doesn't play a role. We provide support, grieving in death, anything," he said.

When he counsels soldiers who are torn between their religious convictions, on the one hand, and going to war and possibly killing people, on the other, he said it does not matter whether they are Muslim.

"I counsel service members before they go to battle, and the majority of them are non-Muslims. I counsel equally, in the same fashion," the chaplain said.

The U.S. intention in Iraq and Afghanistan is to rebuild those countries, he tells service people. "If they are Muslim, I give them the perspective that they can be part of the rebuilding or they can help their comrades understand Muslim culture and Islam. I ask them, 'Do you think that you can contribute?' Then they make the decision," he said.

He also teaches Muslims and non-Muslims to understand one another better. "It's a two-way process. One is to let one group know that although there are some extremist Muslims, who happen to be criminals in my opinion, that is not Islam. I'm a speaker at the National Defense University," he said. "When I was assigned to the naval station at Norfolk, Virginia, I traveled all over the country to train service people -- mainly National Guard and Army who were deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan - about religious sensitivity."

The chaplain said that in his efforts to teach in the opposite direction, he responds to questions from Muslims about the actions of the U.S. military. "In the Muslim community, there are some groups that associate me with Abu Ghraib [the U.S. military prison in Iraq where U.S. troops abused and humiliated Iraqi prisoners]. I tell them that it is an isolated incident. I know how we train our troops. ... There are isolated incidents, but they are not policy," he said.

The chaplain said the same applies to acts of discrimination against Muslims that take place within the U.S. military.

"There is prejudice as part of human nature, but it is not condoned or accepted. If it is known, we take action," he said.

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Note: A Bangla translation of this article is also available at the American Center. If you are interested in the translation, please call the American Center Press Section, Tel: 8837150-4, Fax: 9885688; e-mail: DhakaPA@state.gov; Website: [http:// dhaka.usembassy.gov](http://dhaka.usembassy.gov)